

The Charleston Dancer

BY DORRI OLDS

I didn't know my grandmother when she won prizes dancing the Charleston. I remember Granny lying on the dark green sofa in my parents' house when I was eight and she was seventy. With her head in my lap, she would drowsily hand me her comb and say, "Do my hair, Dorri." And I would comb her short white hair. She'd brush her soft, wrinkly hand across my face and call me *shana punim* (Yiddish for "pretty face"). She was part of the old world and the new, speaking Yiddish and dancing the Charleston. It was her parents who had made the daring leap into the new world, each arriving in the United States at the age of thirteen (her mother from an obscure village in Austria, her father born in Germany and raised in Lithuania).

When I was eight, I knew nothing of Granny's past. I was only concerned with the present. I loved sitting next to her at the big wooden dining table. I never heard anyone chew a bagel so loudly. Her false teeth clanked, then down went the bagel bites with a bellowing gulp of coffee.

I loved visiting Granny and Pop in Philadelphia. They had a sofa as soft as a down pillow and I'd sink a million miles into it. Granny always put dishes of hard candies by the door. I'd pop a coffee treat into my mouth with my right hand, while my left hand snuck a stash into my pocket.

During the day we'd go to the museum, to stores, out to lunch. For Granny, a sandwich was always on rye with mustard. When I ordered mine on white with mayonnaise, she'd look at me incredulously and slowly shake her head.

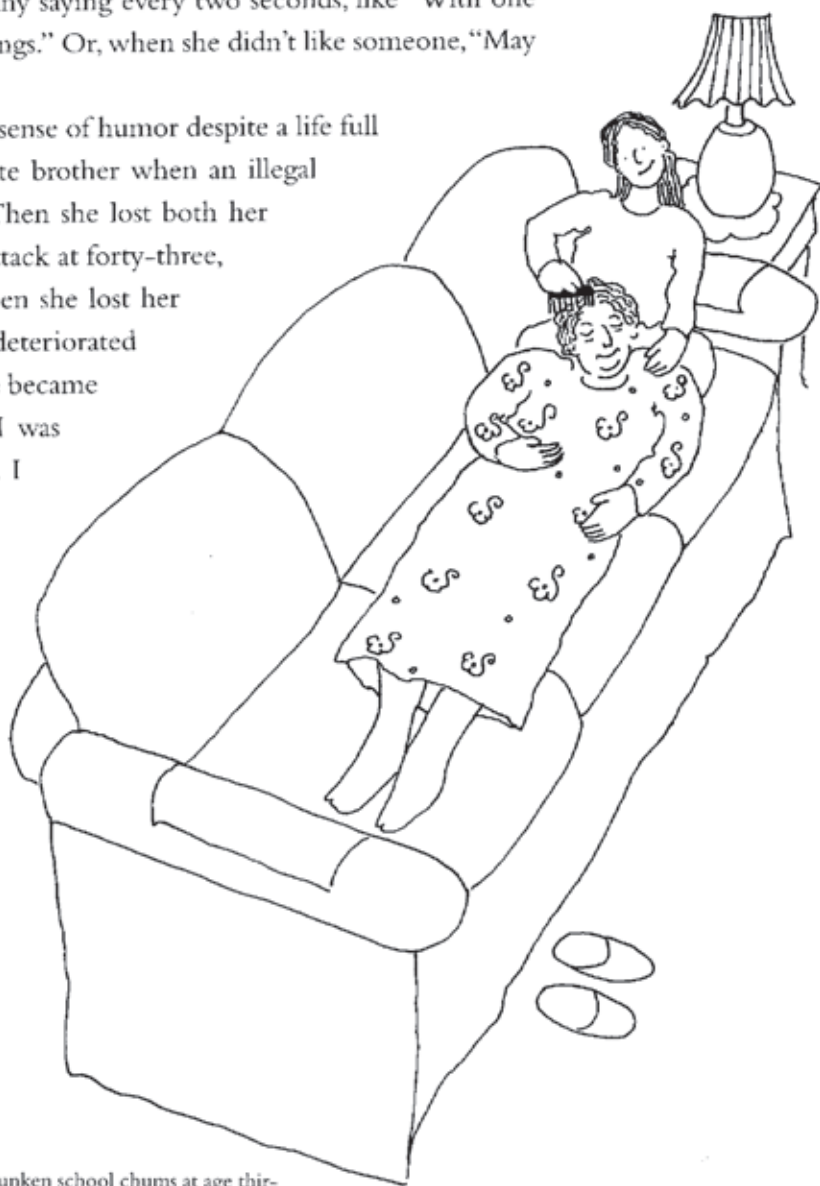
At night we'd play Scrabble. I thought Granny should have been famous; she was impossible to beat. Then afterward we'd watch TV. She loved Pop with all her heart, but she loved Kojak, too – she thought he was the sexiest man alive.

And when he said, "Who loves ya, baby?" she'd clutch at her heart, sigh, and wink at me. The racier she was, the more thrilled I was.

She loved to dish the dirt on people. I loved to listen and laugh. She had a salty tongue, a quick wit, and a funny saying every two seconds, like "With one *tuchas* you can't dance at two weddings." Or, when she didn't like someone, "May he fart in his grave!"

Remarkably, she kept her keen sense of humor despite a life full of tragedy. First she lost her favorite brother when an illegal whiskey still blew up in his face. Then she lost both her sons – Buddy to his second heart attack at forty-three, Carl to suicide at fifty-six. But when she lost her husband of fifty-seven years, she deteriorated rapidly. She changed. I changed. We became two angry wildcats. She thought I was spoiled. I thought she was selfish. I was pissed at her for growing old.

I know she loved me though, and I bet she's looking over my shoulder right now, pen in hand, ready to correct my grammar and serve up a wisecrack.



Dorri Olds did wheelies on motorcycles with drunken school chums at age thirteen; at fifteen she dropped out of high school and ran away to Greenwich Village; at sixteen she went to college, then transferred four times and took a two-year leave of absence to become a rock star; at twenty-six she sold her first painting. Now thirty-six, she has sold fifty-one paintings and has had seventeen gallery exhibits. She owns a busy graphic design company and has just illustrated a newly published children's book, *Irving Goes to Town*, written by Kenneth F. Williams. She lives in New York City.

Granny's Cinnamon Buns

I spent a lot of time in the kitchen with Granny. She loved sweets and so do I, and my great pleasure was to help her bake – and help her taste. One day I watched her pare an apple for pie. She held the knife toward her thumb and I held my breath, sure she was going to cut herself. I could see an indentation on her thumb where the knife touched it, but her hand never slipped. She turned to me and said sharply, "Don't you ever cut an apple like this. You could cut yourself. Do as I say, not as I do!" That tone of voice meant business – and I listened. Even today, in my own kitchen, I wouldn't dream of paring an apple the way she did.

My favorite goodies were her soft, fresh cinnamon buns. Glazed with brown sugar and maple syrup and decorated with perfect walnut halves, they were more beautiful and more delicious than any I have seen in the finest bakeries. They had just the right amount of sweetness. One was perfect; two were too much. When tempted to overdo something in life, I often think about this lesson in moderation I learned from Granny's cinnamon buns.

3 cups flour
½ plus ⅛ cup sugar
¼ teaspoon salt
1 envelope (1 tablespoon) dry
active yeast, dissolved in 2
tablespoons warm (not hot)
water with ½ teaspoon sugar
¼ pound plus 4 tablespoons
(1½ sticks) unsalted butter,
softened
½ cup milk, scalded
2 eggs, beaten
½ cup mashed potatoes
3 tablespoons brown sugar
and/or maple syrup
24 walnut halves
2 teaspoons cinnamon
½ cup raisins

Combine the flour, the ½ cup sugar, and the salt. Mix in the yeast water and set this aside.

Melt the ¼ pound butter in the scalded milk. Add this to the flour, then add the eggs and mashed potatoes. Mix well, stirring until the mixture comes away from the bowl. Refrigerate overnight.

Butter the muffin pans generously. Pour a little brown sugar or maple syrup (Granny used both) into the bottom of each muffin cup, followed by an upside-down walnut half.

Roll out half the dough on a lightly floured board. Spread 2 tablespoons soft butter over the dough. Then spread 1 tablespoon sugar, 1 teaspoon cinnamon, and ¼ cup raisins. Roll the dough up tight and slice it into 1-inch thick pieces. Repeat this process for the other half of the dough.

Place the buns in the muffin tin, set them on top of the stove, and cover them with a towel. Let the dough rise until doubled, about 45 minutes.

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees.

Bake the buns for 25 to 30 minutes. Take the pans out of the oven and let them stand for 1 to 2 minutes before turning them out onto brown paper. This recipe makes 24 delicious cinnamon buns.